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ABSTRACT

Homeschooling enjoys increasing recognition as a respectable alternative to public and private school education. State homeschooling populations are doubling every 3 years. With personal computers and the Internet, homeschooling families have access to a wealth of educational materials at all grade levels and for many populations. Homeschooling helps rural families deal with problems inherent to rural life. The fact that some families have chosen to pursue their children's education outside of public school does not lessen the responsibilities that educators have to assist in the education of all children. Learning is the operative word in education, and the setting is becoming less important. Collaboration is needed among legislators, educators, homeschooling organizations, and parents. State departments of education can work with legislators to adopt effective homeschooling programs on a statewide basis, create exit standards for homeschooled children, and consider whether documentation of academic progress would be required for homeschoolers wishing to reenter public schools. Teacher education programs could teach skills to facilitate the transition of children from one academic setting to another, prepare educators to work with homeschooling parents and children, and instill positive attitudes towards homeschooling. Local school districts can include homeschooling parents in in-service activities, offer public school facilities and services to homeschooling families, and help local communities develop new visions of what it means to help children learn. The ultimate goal will be to have homeschooling programs under the direction of state departments of education. (Contains 15 references.) (TD)

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The Worth of a Child:

Rural Homeschooling/Public School Partnerships

Are Leading the Way

Richard C. Pearson

2002

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The Worth of a Child: Rural Homeschooling/Public School Partnerships Are Leading the Way.

As one examines the lives of men and women who were major contributors to America's society and values, it seems a disproportionate number of them obtained their education via homeschooling. In the 18th, 19th, and well into the 20th Century, many, if not the majority of these contributing Americans were homeschooled.

Today, once again, homeschooling is one of the fastest growing initiatives in America's rural and urban areas. It enjoys increasing recognition as a respectable alternative to public and private school education. Estimates of the number of children being homeschooled in America range from 500,000 to 2,000,000, or from 2% to 5% of the total school age population. These percentages are supported by the Home School Legal Defense Association, with the suggestion that the numbers will eventually level off at approximately 5% of America's school age children. (Klipsch,1995). As of 2002, there is no indication that numbers are leveling off. Rather, the homeschooling movement is experiencing phenomenal growth in every state. As a rule, state homeschooling populations are doubling every three years. (Whitmire,1996). Homeschoolers are becoming a huge segment of America's student population.

Homeschooling In Rural America, 2002.

New visions and models of what is involved in learning invite a shift in teacher education from an emphasis on what the teacher does to careful and sustained attention to what and how students learn. Education in America is moving towards monitoring or certifying demonstrated competencies rather than specifying how they are to be obtained. Today's combination of knowledge about learning coupled with effective delivery systems is altering the role of rural

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education. This is, and will continue to have a tremendous impact upon homeschooling in rural America.

It becomes relevant when thousands of rural families have opted to homeschool their children rather than dealing with problems inherent to rural life. The following are considerations:

(1) In many instances, rural children are bused long distances to attend K - 12 schools. In some cases, students spend several hours riding school buses each day.

(2) In other situations, the distances are such that students must move away from home to attend secondary schools and complete graduation requirements.

(3) The costs of maintaining an expensive physical plant and/or transportation facilities for a limited rural enrollment is often prohibitive to rural districts. Therefore, on a too frequent basis, many rural schools have limited staffing, facilities and curriculum

(4) Because rural communities have different needs and resources than those found in populated areas, nontraditional educational programs (homeschooling, adult education, minority education, etc.) are becoming prominent throughout rural America. Nontraditional rural programs cover a variety of services that are not typical of urban schooling. These services can take place outside of the school setting and often embody a community-level response to perceived needs. Special populations in rural areas -- minorities (Hispanic, American Indian, etc.), disadvantaged, handicapped, gifted, etc., have specific educational needs which can be, and are being met by homeschooling. (Sheffer, 1997).

(5) In 1991, it was reported that 86% of homeschooling families did so because of religious reasons. (LaRue & LaRue, 1991). They did not feel that public and private schools were putting

enough emphasis upon ethics, morals, Christian values, etc. Since the Columbine High School violence of 1999, and even before, school environment became one of the main reasons for parents/care givers to homeschool their children. (Fager & Brewster, 2000). Violence, or the fear thereof, has not abated since 1999, and there continues to be increasing societal concern about the safety of students in schools. This has had a definite effect upon rural parents/care givers as well as those in urban and populated areas.

The following are some additional reasons families choose to homeschool:

1. Children who have had problems adjusting to the public and private schools.
2. Overcrowding, and drugs in schools.
3. Parents who want to discipline their children as they choose.
4. To have a "warm, loving" home environment for special needs children.
5. To avoid negative peer pressure.
6. School curriculums which parents/care givers perceive to have little relevance to life.
7. To have more time for development of special talents and interests.*

*Many educators feel that gifted and talented students will flourish under a regular curriculum. Such is not the case. It has been found that a significant number of public school drop-outs are among the gifted and talented. (Kirk, Gallagher, & Anastasiow, 1997).

The Difficulty of Establishing Accurate Numbers.

There is difficulty in establishing accurate estimates of America's homeschooling population. First, through provisions of the First and Fourteenth Amendments, parents/care givers cannot be forced to register their homeschoolers with any state or federal agency. They may withdraw their children from local school districts without prior notification or registration.

These parents/care givers are citizens and taxpayers who are supporting public schools. They have simply chosen an alternative method of educating their children. This is an inherent right. Thus, the number of children being homeschooled in America is, at best, an estimate. States are aware of only the families who have voluntarily registered their intent to homeschool. There are usually thousands more who have not registered.

Secondly, states determine their own homeschooling efforts and these can and do vary a great deal. Some states have no homeschooling program at all. Others have definite programs headed by an office within their State Departments of Education..

Academic and Social Concerns of Homeschooling

Parents/care givers are becoming less and less hesitant to teach students at home. The word is out via state and local homeschooling organizations, experienced home teachers, published and electronic sources, that homeschooling is an effective method of learning. Research has shown that, (A), there is no positive correlation between the educational performance of students and the teacher's education. (Montana Home School Reference Guide, 1995-1996), and (B), that homeschoolers score as well or better with national achievement testing than their public school peers. (Ray, 1996; Oregon, 1988; Tennessee, 1988; U.S. News and World Report, 1996). This claim can be made for those homeschoolers who take standard achievement tests – no state can require them to do so. Thus, it is difficult to measure the total homeschooling academic effort. However, it is well documented that homeschooling efforts succeed academically as well, if not better, than many public school curriculums when both groups of students are tested. (Calvery, Bell, & Vaupel, 1992).

The performance of homeschooled children is attributed to a number of reasons. One

reason is class size. Student to teacher ratio is usually two-on-one or at the worst, one-on-four. (Lee, 2001). Secondly, homeschooling parents/care givers are often highly involved in their children's learning, and what happens at home is clearly related to learning success. Lastly, there are effective homeschooling curriculums readily available as well as other resources that continue to expand.

Since the late 1980s, legislators in numerous states have passed laws to be more accommodating to homeschooling programs. (LaRue & LaRue, 1991). Idaho's House Bill 171, passed in 1995, initiated dual enrollment programs. This means homeschooled and private school students residing in Idaho, may select those classes and activities in the public school setting to supplement or combine with their homeschooling curriculum. They may also participate in extra-curricular activities such as team sports, academic organizations, clubs, cheerleading, etc., when they meet the same testing requirements as do their public school peers.

Some states will grant a high school diploma to homeschoolers based upon ACT or SAT scores. Some states leave diploma-granting up to local school districts. As far as can be determined, all state colleges or universities will accept homeschoolers who pass entrance examinations or required levels of ACT, and SAT scores, the same as students from public and private schools. In some instances, colleges and universities require homeschooling students to enroll on a provisional basis until they establish a minimum grade point average and then they are accepted as regular students. Thus, it is impossible to establish uniform criteria for homeschoolers as states differ in their requirements.

Usually, homeschooling is basically an elementary age effort unless there are extenuating circumstances of school environment, adjustment, distances, etc. Many children are homeschooled for just a few years and then return to secondary schools and graduate with their

age level peers. Studies have shown that there is little, if any, lack of social skills development under homeschooling programs. (Montana Home School Reference Guide, 1995-1996). Indeed, parents/care givers say that socialization is one of the primary reasons for choosing home schooling. (Montgomery, 1989). Because homeschooling is most often found at the elementary age level, close ties to the family are the norm regardless of the type of schooling. Also, homeschooling families often collaborate in instructional efforts, thus fostering the development of socialization skills much the same as in public schools. The proof of attaining successful socialization skills are the many successful citizens, educators, business owners, leaders in all fields who have been homeschooled.

Technology and Homeschooling.

It is no longer a question of how will homeschoolers find necessary curricula for home study but rather, how to differentiate and select from the incredible amount that is available in electronic, print, and non-print formats. Homeschooling families have numerous options and rich and rewarding curriculums are readily accessible to them for homeschooling purposes. With the advent of technology and personal computers, homeschooling in rural areas is no longer dependent, so much, upon community resources. With a computer and a modem, homeschoolers have access to a wealth of educational materials at all grade levels and for many populations. Educational software, the Internet and other online resources, CD formats, electronic sources to numerous to mention -- are all accessible to homeschoolers. A few minutes scanning the Internet will amaze any inquirer as to the availability of educational resources for homeschooling.

Also, several universities (Indiana University, Texas Tech., University of California at

Berkeley, University of Nebraska, etc.), have developed independent study courses for high school equivalency credits. Homeschooling students can earn high school credits and graduate in a certified program by enrolling in one of these university-sponsored degrees. Often these courses include computer-accessible modules.

For homeschooling families without access to a computer, online curricula choices would be more difficult to attain. However, with some expenditure of effort and time, rural families can readily access electronic resources at schools, libraries, community agencies, etc. Online facilities are increasingly available everywhere in America, and certainly accessible to any who wish to make the effort.

Conclusion.

It is incumbent upon educators to become acquainted with and support the homeschooling programs of their respective states. The fact that some families have chosen to pursue their children's education outside of public school systems, or in a combination of homeschooling and the public school setting, does not lessen the responsibilities that educators have to assist in the education of all children.

It is doubtful that any state can require homeschooling families to register within the state or local school districts as this raises freedom of religion and other constitutional issues. Many private schools and homeschooling efforts educate students through the lens of religious education, (1st Amendment), and American parents/care givers have long had the right to determine how their children are schooled. (14th Amendment).

One of the most effective methods of assisting homeschooling efforts is for professional educators to advertise and publish lists of classes and services in their states and districts which

would help facilitate homeschooling efforts. For example, the role of public school libraries can be one of these services. The ability of a library to service homeschooled children is an obvious one. Library books, collections, and services that are available to public school students should be made available during the same hours and in the same manner to homeschooling children residing in local school district areas. The same can be said of school testing and counseling services, athletic programs and so forth.

Secondly, professional educators need to address negative conceptions towards homeschooling found in their organizations and among their peers. This will help their communities to develop new visions of what it means to know and help children learn, be it in public, private, parochial, or homeschools. "Learning " is the operative word in education and the setting is becoming less and less important.

Lastly, current teacher education programs make little or no effort to prepare acting and future teachers to assist and become involved with homeschooling efforts in their communities. In the absence of professional education involvement, far more has been done by political forces, homeschooling organizations and state legislators, than by educators. A more collaborative effort is needed in every state between legislators, educators, homeschooling organizations, parents and care givers.

The following are some possible areas of collaborative involvement:

State Departments of Education

1. Work with state legislatures to adopt effective homeschoolng programs on a state-wide basis.
2. Clarify or create exit standards for homeschooled children as well as for public and private schools students.

3. Investigate the possibility of requiring documentation of academic progress should homeschoolers wish to re-enter public schools.

Universities and Colleges

1. Provide all teacher educators with skills to facilitate the transition of children from one academic setting to another.

2. Prepare all educators to work effectively with homeschooling parents/care givers and students.

3. Instill a positive attitude and approach in teacher educators towards homeschooling.

Local School Districts

1. Include homeschooling parents/care givers in in-service activities when possible.

2. Identify homeschooling families in their districts and offer public school facilities and services to them.

3. Help local communities to develop new visions of what it means to know and help children to learn, be it in public, private, parochial, or homeschools.

Perhaps this entire process can be started by states allowing local school districts to advertise some of their facilities and services to homeschooling families. Not all homeschoolers will take advantage of such opportunities, but many will. Cooperative efforts will grow under these circumstances. The ultimate goal will be to have viable homeschooling programs in each state and under the direction of State Departments of Education. The benefits are obvious to all concerned.

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